

Weaponizing Education: The Rise, Fall, and Return of the GI Bill

Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.
Nelson Mandela¹



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Growing up I can remember my father telling stories of service members in the medical battalion he commanded in World War II (WWII) who after the war with his encouragement and their GI Bill educational benefits went to school to become doctors, nurses, and dentists. They were among the 2,300,000 veterans who attended US colleges and universities through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act passed in 1944. The American Legion navigated the bill through the twists and turns of congressional support, and it was one of their leaders who invented the catchy GI Bill shorthand.²

As with most political legislation, there were mixed motives driving passage of the act, and like many policies in America, the primary impetus was economic. While the war was raging overseas, at home the US Department of Labor predicted that by the war's end, 16 million service members would be jobless. Apprehensive about the prospect of yet another financial depression, in 1943 a White House agency recommended that the federal government fund education and training for the individuals who had served during the war.²

While troops stormed the beaches of Normandy, wartime President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) signed the bill that delivered not only educational and training opportunities for service members and veterans, but also funded home loans and US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals. The bill was practical in that it provided not only tuition, but also books, supplies, a living stipend, and counseling for the students. The bill technically expired in 1956, but a series of extensions and expansions has been true to the original intention to offer those who served their nation in the military a better life as citizens.

Articles describing the impact of the GI Bill use terms like life changing and transformative.^{3,4} Our contemporary culture makes it dif-

ficult to imagine how out of reach a college education was for the generation that fought WWII. Universities were primarily for the rich and connected, the powerful and privileged. Were it not for the upward social mobility the GI Bill propelled, the American dream would not have become a reality for many farmers, small town merchants, and factory workers. The GI Bill though could not by itself ensure equity. The systemic racism endemic in the United States and among the elected representatives who debated the bill resulted in many Black service members especially in the South being denied entrance to institutions of higher learning.⁵ Despite this invidious discrimination, the bill was a profound effort to help many other service members to successfully reintegrate into the society they had preserved and defended.⁴

"With the signing of this bill, a well-rounded program of special veterans' benefits is nearly completed," FDR said, capturing its noble intent: "It gives emphatic notice to the men and women in our armed forces that the American people do not intend to let them down."⁶

Regrettably, we have not kept FDR's pledge. Now unscrupulous businesses are preying on the aspirations of military personnel and veterans for an education and thwarting their ability to seek gainful employment. For more than a decade, respected news media have reported that for-profit universities were exploiting service members trying to improve their lives through obtaining a college education via the GI Bill.⁷ The sad irony is that what enabled the exploitation to occur was a major expansion of the benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This version granted educational funding to any individual who had served on active duty for 90 days or more after September 10, 2001.⁸ Federal law prohibits for-profit educational institutions from receiving more than 90% of their total revenue from federal student aid. A

loophole in the law enabled these institutions to categorize GI Bill funding as private not government dollars. Bad old American greed drove these for-profit colleges and universities to aggressively recruit veterans who trusted in the good faith of the academic institutions. Once the GI Bill monies were exhausted, veterans had already invested so much time and energy in a degree or certificate, the schools could persuade them to take out student loans with the promise of job placement assistance that never materialized. They took advantage of the veterans' hopes to fatten their own bottom line in the face of declining enrolments.⁹ Journalists, government, think tank reports, and even a documentary described the tragic stories of service members left unemployed with immense debt and degrees that to many of them were now worthless.¹⁰

After years of reporters exposing the scam and politically thwarted efforts to stop it, Congress and President Biden closed what was known as the 90/10 loophole. This ended the weaponization of education it had promoted. In October 2022, the US Department of Education announced its final rule to prohibit the widespread educational fraud that had betrayed so many veterans and service members, which Secretary Dennis McDonough described as “abuse.”¹¹

Some readers may wonder why I have devoted an editorial to a topic that seems somewhat distant from the health care that is the primary domain of *Federal Practitioner*. It happens that education is in closer proximity to health for our patients than many of us might have realized. A 2018 *Military Medicine* study found that veterans who took advantage of the educational opportunities of the GI Bill had better health and reduced smoking, among other benefits.¹² This connection between health and education should serve as a source of pride for all of us in federal practice as we are part of organizations that affirm the holistic concept of health that embraces not just medicine but education, housing, and other services essential for comprehensive well-being.

Disclaimer

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